

Questions
of Life

Does God Heal Today?

NICKY GUMBEL

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Alpha

**Does God
Heal Today?**

Booklets taken from Questions of Life:

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Why Did Jesus Die?

How Can We Have Faith?

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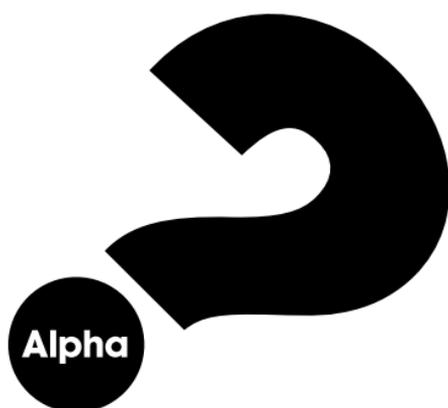
Does God Heal Today?

What About the Church?

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

Does God Heal Today?

NICKY GUMBEL



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Does God Heal Today?

A few years ago, a Japanese girl asked Pippa and me to pray for her back problem to be healed. We placed our hands on her and asked God to heal her. After that I tried to avoid bumping into her because I was not sure how to explain to her why she hadn't been healed. One day she came round the corner and I could not avoid her. I thought it only polite to ask the dreaded question, 'How is your back?'

'Oh,' she replied, 'it was completely healed after you prayed for it.' I don't know why I was so surprised, but I was.

In 1982, John Wimber came to speak at our church. At the time I was practising as a barrister. I was quite cynical about his visit because, not only had he come from California to speak about healing, but he also wanted us to 'do healing'. Although I had heard some talks on healing before, no one had ever suggested that we actually try it. This was unfamiliar territory. After giving his talk to a gathering of sixty leaders from the church he announced that we were going to break for coffee, before having a workshop.

We were nervous about this prospect and dragged out the coffee break for as long as we could. When

we returned, the people who had been at the front felt it would be selfish to hog the best seats, so they hurried to the back! John then said that his team had received twelve 'words of knowledge' about people in the room. He told us that by a 'word of knowledge' (1 Corinthians 12:8) he meant a supernatural revelation of facts concerning a person or a situation, which is not learned by the efforts of the natural mind, but rather is made known by the Spirit of God. This could be in the form of a picture, a word seen or heard in the mind, or a feeling experienced physically. He then read out the list of words of knowledge and said that he was going to invite people to come forward for prayer.

One by one, people responded to what were quite detailed descriptions. One word, for instance, was for a man who had injured his back chopping wood when he was aged fourteen. The level of faith in the room began to rise. Every word of knowledge was responded to. One of them concerned infertility. Being British we don't even talk about subjects like that, let alone respond to 'words of knowledge' about them. However, a girl who had been unable to conceive, bravely went forward. She was prayed for and had the first of five children exactly nine months later!

My attitude during that evening reflects the fear and scepticism that many bring to the subject of healing today. I decided to go back to the Bible to try to understand what is said about healing. Of course, God

heals with the co-operation of doctors, nurses and the medical profession. But the more I have looked, the more convinced I am that we should also expect God to heal miraculously today.

Healing in the Bible

In the Old Testament we find that it is in God's character to heal; 'I am the Lord who heals you' (Exodus 15:26). We find God's promises to bring healing to those who listen to him and who honour him (eg, Exodus 23:25–26; Psalm 41), as well as several examples of miraculous healing (eg, 1 Kings 13:6; 2 Kings 4:8–37; Isaiah 38).

One of the most striking examples is the healing of Naaman, the commander of the army of Aram, who had leprosy. God healed him after he had reluctantly dipped himself seven times in the River Jordan. 'His flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy' (2 Kings 5:14), and he recognised the God of Israel to be the only true God. Elisha, who had instructed him, refused the payment, which Naaman offered (although his servant Gehazi made the fatal mistake of trying, deceitfully, to get money for himself as a result of the healing). First, from this story we see that healing can have a remarkable effect on a person's life – not just physically, but also in their relationship with God. Healing and faith can go hand in hand. Secondly, if God acted in this way in the Old Testament, when

there were only glimpses of the kingdom of God and the outpouring of the Spirit, we can confidently expect that he will do so even more now that Jesus has ushered in the kingdom of God and the age of the Spirit.

The first recorded words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel are, 'The time has come... The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15). The theme of the kingdom of God is central to the ministry of Jesus. The expressions 'the kingdom of God' and 'the kingdom of heaven' are used more than eighty-two times, although the latter is confined to Matthew's Gospel.¹ The Greek word for 'kingdom', means not only 'kingdom' in the sense of a political or geographical realm, but also carries the notion of activity – the activity of ruling or reigning.

In the teaching of Jesus, the kingdom of God has a future aspect that will only be fulfilled with a decisive event at 'the end of the age' (Matthew 13:49). The end of the age will come when Jesus returns. When he came the first time, he came in weakness; when he returns, he will come 'with power and great glory' (Matthew 24:30). History is moving towards this climax (Matthew 25:31). In all, there are over 300 references in the New Testament to the second coming of Christ. When he returns it will be obvious to all. History, as we know it, will end. There will be a universal resurrection and a day of judgment (2 Thessalonians 1:8–9; Matthew 25:32). For some (those who reject Christ), it will be a

day of destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:8–9); for others, it will be a day of receiving their inheritance in the kingdom of God (Matthew 25:34). There will be a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). Jesus himself will be there (Revelation 21:22–23) and so will all who love and obey him. It will be a place of intense happiness which goes on forever (1 Corinthians 2:9). We will have new bodies which are imperishable and glorious (1 Corinthians 15:42–43). There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4). All who believe will be totally healed on that day.

Until that day there is an element of waiting. As Paul puts it: ‘We... groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for... the redemption of our bodies’ (Romans 8:23). That is, we wait eagerly for the age to come, when God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28). It’s important to keep this eternal perspective as we look at this subject, because at the moment not everybody is healed.

A good friend of mine, Patrick Pearson-Miles, has not been healed. He has kidney failure and has been on a dialysis machine for over twenty-five years. He is a remarkably brave man, and also a man of great faith. He has been praying for healing for many years, and we have prayed for him many times, but so far he has not been healed. Patrick said how much he was helped by a conversation he had with John Wimber, who himself suffered with cancer for many years. John said to him, ‘The real gift is that of salvation, eternal life, all the

things that Jesus gives us. If we're healed physically in this life that, if you like, is a bonus.' It's vital to keep in mind this future aspect of God's kingdom.

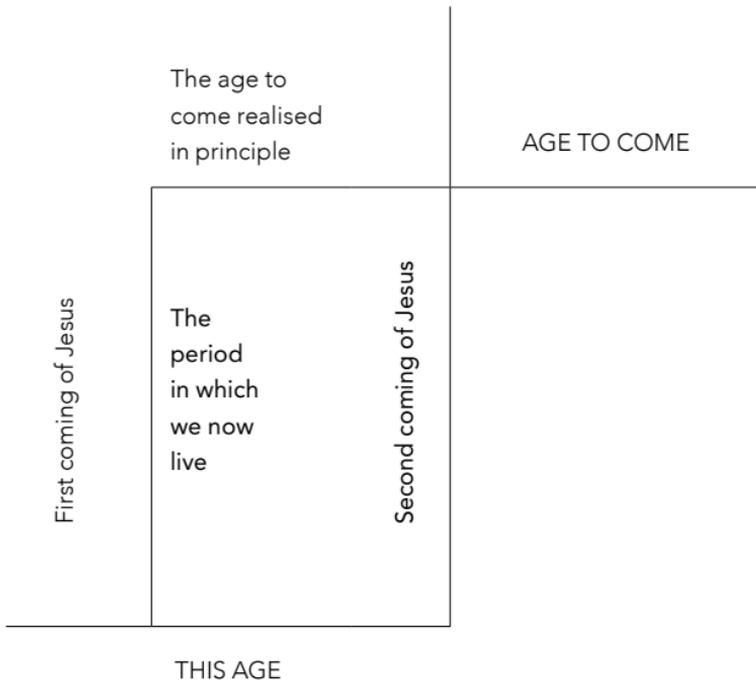
There is also a present aspect to the kingdom as we see in the teaching and life of Jesus. He told the Pharisees, 'The kingdom of God is among you' (Luke 17:20-21). It's for the here and now: the signs of its approach are evident to us. In the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:44-46), Jesus suggests that the kingdom is something which can be discovered and experienced in this age. He went on to demonstrate this present reality of the kingdom by all that he did during his ministry, in the forgiveness of sins, the suppression of evil and the healing of the sick.

The kingdom is both 'now' and 'not yet'. The Jewish expectation was that the Messiah would immediately inaugurate the final kingdom, as shown below:

THIS AGE

AGE TO COME

Jesus' teaching was a modification of this and can be summarised as below:



We live between the times, when the age to come has broken into history. We see people's bodies being healed and people being set free from addictions. But the old age continues, and the powers of the new age have erupted into this age.

A quarter of the Gospels is concerned with healing. Although Jesus did not heal all in Judea who were sick, we often read of him healing either individuals, or groups of people (eg, Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Mark 6:56; Luke 4:40; 6:19; 9:11). It was part of the normal activity of the kingdom.

Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom and healed the sick. Then he sent the twelve apostles out to do exactly the same. Jesus said to them: 'Preach this message: "The kingdom of heaven is near". Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons...' (Matthew 10:8).

Nor was it only the twelve to whom he gave this commission. There was also a further group of seventy-two whom he appointed. He told them to go out and 'heal the sick... and tell them, "The kingdom of God is near you"' (Luke 10:9). They returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name' (v.17).

Nor did he stop at the twelve and the seventy-two. Jesus expected *all* his disciples to do the same. He told his disciples to 'go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:18-20, italics mine). He did not say, 'Everything except, of course, the healing bit.'

Furthermore, as you look at the development of the church in the New Testament you see this is what they did. In the book of Acts we see the working out of

this commission. The disciples continued to preach and teach, but they also healed the sick, raised the dead and cast out demons. They didn't just talk about it; they did it! (Acts 3:1-10; 4:12; 5:12-16; 8:5-13; 9:32-43; 14:3, 8-10; 19:11-12; 20:9-12; 28:8-9). It is clear from 1 Corinthians 12-14 that Paul did not believe that such abilities were confined to the apostles. Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews says that God testified to his message by 'signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit' (Hebrews 2:4).

Nowhere in the Bible does it suggest that healing was confined to any particular period of history. On the contrary, healing is one of the signs of the kingdom which was inaugurated by Jesus Christ and continues to this day. Therefore, we should expect God to continue to heal miraculously today as part of his kingdom activity.

Healing in church history

Early church writers such as Quadratus, Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen reveal that healing formed a normal part of the activity of the early church.

Irenaeus (c.130 – c.200), who was Bishop of Lyons and one of the theologians of the early church, wrote, 'Others still heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole.'

At around the same time, Origen (c.185 – c.254), another early church father, said of Christians that ‘They expel evil spirits, and perform many cures, and foresee certain events... the name of Jesus... can take away diseases’.

Two hundred years later there was still an expectation that God would heal people directly. St Augustine wrote in *The City of God* that ‘*even now miracles are wrought in the name of Christ*’. He cites the example of a blind man’s sight restored in Milan. He then describes the cure of a man he was staying with, called Innocentius. He was being treated by the doctors for fistulae, of which he had ‘a large number intricately seated in the rectum’! He had undergone one very painful operation. It was thought that he would not survive another. While they were praying for him he was cast down to the ground as if someone had hurled him violently to the earth, groaning and sobbing, his whole body shaking so that he could not speak. The dreaded day for the next operation came. ‘The surgeons arrived... the frightful instruments are produced... the part is bared; the surgeon... with knife in hand, eagerly looks for the sinus that is to be cut. He searches for it with his eyes; he feels for it with his finger; he applies every kind of scrutiny.’ He found a perfectly healed wound. ‘No words of mine can describe the joy, and praise, and thanksgiving to the merciful and almighty God which

was poured from the lips of all, with tears and gladness. Let the scene be imagined rather than described!

Next he described the healing of Innocentia – a devout woman of the highest rank in the state – who was healed of what the doctors described as incurable breast cancer. The doctor was curious to find out how she had been healed. When she told him that Jesus had healed her, he was furious and said, ‘I thought you would make some great discovery to me.’ She, shuddering at the indifference, quickly replied, ‘What great thing was it for Christ to heal a cancer, who raised one who had been four days dead?’

He goes on to tell of a doctor with gout who was healed in the ‘very act of baptism’ and an old comedian who was also cured at baptism, not only of paralysis, but also of a hernia. Augustine says he knows of so many miraculous healings that he says at one point, ‘What am I to do? I am so pressed by the promise of finishing this work, that I cannot record all the miracles I know... even now, therefore, many miracles are wrought, the same God, who wrought those we read of, still performing them, by whom he will and as he will.’

Edward Gibbon, the English rationalist, historian and scholar, best known as the author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), lists five causes for the remarkable and rapid growth of Christianity. One of these is ‘the miraculous powers of the primitive Church’. He says, ‘The Christian Church,

from the time of the apostles and their first disciples has claimed an uninterrupted succession of miraculous powers, the gift of tongues, of vision and of prophecy, the power of expelling demons, of healing the sick and of raising the dead.' Gibbon goes on to point out the inconsistency of his own day when 'a latent, and even involuntary, scepticism adheres to the most pious dispositions'. By contrast to the early church, he writes that in the church of his day 'admission of supernatural truths is much less an active consent than a cold and placid acquiescence. Accustomed long since to observe and to respect the invariable order of Nature, our reason, or at least our imagination, is not sufficiently prepared to sustain the visible action of the Deity.' The same could be said even more so of our own day. All the way through church history God has continued to heal people directly.

Healing today

Some people believe that God chose to confine miraculous healing to the age of the early church. But God is still healing people today. In fact, there are so many wonderful stories of God healing that it is difficult to know which to give as an example.

I once met a woman called Jean Smith, who was then in her sixties. Sixteen-and-a-half years previously she had an infection that had irrevocably eaten away

the retinas and mirrors behind her eyes, and left her blind. As well as having to rely on a guide dog, she was also in a lot of pain. She had attended Alpha in her local church in Wales. On the weekend away she experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in a way she never had before. Amazingly, the pain she had suffered for so many years simply stopped. She went to church that evening to give thanks to God. The minister of her church then offered to anoint her with oil to signify this healing that had taken place over the weekend (in accordance with biblical practice). Wiping away the oil, she looked up, and she could see the Communion table in front of her. She went home that night and saw her husband for the first time in sixteen-and-a-half years. She could not believe how white his hair had gone!

Raniero Cantalamessa points out that Christians have two options when facing the problem of ill health today: the way of nature and the way of grace.

Human nature encompasses science and technology and all our resources – in short, all that we have received from God in creation and all that we have developed from that by using our intelligence. But then there's this second way: grace, which indicates faith and the prayers by which, as God may will, we sometimes obtain healings in a way that goes beyond the scope of human resources. Against

disease and ill health, a Christian cannot be satisfied to use only the facilities of nature – to set up hospitals or to work alongside with the structures of the state to provide care and comfort. Christians have a very special power of their own, given to them by Christ. He gave them authority to cure every disease and every sickness. It would be an omission to fail to have recourse to this power and so fail to hold out hope, especially to those to whom science denies all hope.²

Of course, not everyone we pray for will necessarily be healed, and no human being can ultimately avoid death. Our bodies are decaying. At some point it may even be right to prepare a person for death rather than praying for their healing. Indeed, the love and concern shown to people who are dying, for example, by the hospice movement, gives dignity to the terminally ill and is another outworking of Jesus' commission to care for the sick. At this point we need to be sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We should still be open to praying for people to be healed. The more people we pray for, the more we shall see healed.³ Those who are not healed usually speak of the blessing of being prayed for – provided they are prayed for with love and sensitivity. I remember a group of us at theological college

praying for a man with a bad back. I don't think he was healed, but he said to me afterwards, 'This is the first time since I have been at theological college that I felt anyone cared.'

Some are given special gifts of healing (1 Corinthians 12:9). Today, around the world, we find examples of those with an extraordinary gift of healing. This does not mean that we can leave it all to them. The commission to heal is for all of us. Just as we do not all have the gift of being evangelists, but we are all called to tell others the good news, so too we do not all have the gift of healing, but we are all called to pray for the sick.

How in practice do we go about praying for the sick? It is vital to remember that it is God who heals, not us. There is no technique involved. We pray with love and simplicity. The motivation of Jesus was his compassion for people (Mark 1:41; Matthew 9:36). If we love people we will always treat them with respect and dignity. If we believe it is Jesus who heals we will pray with simplicity, because it is not our prayer, but the power of God that brings healing.

Here is a simple pattern:

Where does it hurt?

We ask the person who wants prayer for healing what is wrong and what they would like us to pray for.

Why does the person have this condition?

Of course, a leg broken in a car accident will be obvious, but at other times we may need to ask God to show us if there is a root cause to the problem. One woman in our congregation had developed backache with pain in her left hip, which interfered with sleep, movement and work. The doctor prescribed pills for arthritis. She asked for prayer one evening. The girl who was praying for her said that the word 'forgiveness' had come to her mind. After a struggle the woman was able to forgive somebody who had wronged her, and she was partially healed. Later as she prayed with someone else she felt she ought to write the person a letter telling them that she forgave them. As she posted the letter she was totally healed.

How do I pray?

There are various models in the New Testament that we follow. They are all simple. Sometimes we pray for God to heal in the name of Jesus and we ask the Holy Spirit to come on the person. Prayer may be accompanied by anointing with oil (James 5:14). More often it is accompanied by the laying on of hands (Luke 4:40).

How are they feeling?

After we have prayed we usually ask the person what they are experiencing. Sometimes they feel nothing – in which case we continue to pray. At other times they

feel that they are healed, although time alone will tell. On other occasions they feel better but are not totally healed, in which case we continue as Jesus did with the blind man (Mark 8:22–25). We continue praying until we feel it is right to stop.

What next?

After praying for healing it is important to reassure people of God's love for them regardless of whether they are healed or not, and to give them the liberty to come back and be prayed for again. We must avoid putting burdens on people, such as suggesting that it is their lack of faith that has prevented healing from taking place. We always encourage people to go on praying and to ensure that their lives are rooted in the healing community of the church – which is the place where long-term healing so often occurs.

Finally, it is important to persist in praying for people to be healed. It is easy to get discouraged, especially if we do not see immediate dramatic results. We continue to pray out of obedience to Jesus' commission to preach the kingdom and heal the sick. If we persist, over the years we will see God's healing power at work.

I was once asked to visit a woman in the Brompton Hospital. She was in her thirties, had three children and was pregnant with a fourth. Her partner had left her and she was on her own. Her third child, who was a child with Down's syndrome, had a hole in his heart

which had been operated on. The operation had not been a success and, not unnaturally, the medical staff wanted to turn the machines off. Three times they asked her if they could turn the machines off and let the baby die. She said no, as she wanted to try one last thing. She wanted someone to pray for him. So I came, and she told me that she didn't believe in God, but she showed me her son. He had tubes all over him and his body was bruised and swollen. She said that the doctors had indicated that even if he recovered he would have brain damage because his heart had stopped for such a long time. She said, 'Will you pray?' So I prayed in the name of Jesus for God to heal him. Then I explained to her how she could give her life to Jesus Christ and she did that. I left, but returned two days later. She came running out the moment she saw me. She said, 'I've been trying to get hold of you: something amazing has happened. The night after you prayed he completely turned the corner. He has recovered.' Within a few days he had gone home. I tried to keep in contact with her, but didn't know where she lived, although she kept leaving messages on the phone. About six months later I was in the lift in another hospital and saw a mother and child whom I did not immediately recognise. The woman said, 'Are you Nicky?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'That is the little boy you prayed for. It is amazing. Not only has he recovered from the operation, but his hearing, which was bad beforehand, is better.'

Since then I have taken two funerals for other members of that family. At each of them people have come up to me, none of them churchgoers, saying, 'You were the person who prayed for Craig to be healed and God healed him.' They all believe that God healed him, because they know that he was dying. The change in Vivienne, the child's mother, had also made a deep impression on them. She was so changed after coming to Christ that she decided to marry the person with whom she was living. He had come back to her after seeing the change in her life. They are now married and she is totally transformed. On the second occasion, Vivienne went round all the relatives and friends saying, 'I didn't believe, but now I do believe.' Not long afterwards, Craig's uncle and aunt came to church, sat in the front row and gave their lives to Jesus Christ. They did so because they knew they had seen God's power in healing.

Endnotes

1. The two terms are synonymous. 'Heaven' was a common Jewish expression for referring to God without mentioning the divine name. The Jewish background to Matthew's Gospel, as opposed to the Gentile orientation of Luke and Mark, probably explains the different use.

2. Raniero Cantalamessa, *Come, Creator Spirit* (The Liturgical Press, 2003), p.277.

3. Some years ago Dr Rex Gardner, a Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, investigated a series of cases of alleged healing miracles. His conclusions were as follows: 'Intellectual honesty demands that (after discounting cases with dubious diagnoses, those where psychosomatic considerations are important, and others where the cure might be attributable to adjuvant medical therapy or where spontaneous remission might be the explanation) there remain some cures for which medicine has no explanation... [I]n these cases the constant association of prayer to God cannot be discounted. Nor can it be set aside as merely a psychological 'boost', for some of the healings cannot have a psychosomatic explanation... [I]n absolute terms the number [of miraculous healings] appears to be fairly rapidly increasing as more churches become open to this work of God; and percentage-wise more are being healed as the Holy Spirit is being permitted to develop ministries within local fellowships.' R. F. R. Gardner, *Healing Miracles: A Doctor Investigates* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), pp.205-206.

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*All titles are by Nicky Gumbel,
who is vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton*

About the Author

Nicky Gumbel is the pioneer of Alpha. He read law at Cambridge and theology at Oxford, practised as a barrister and is now vicar of HTB in London. He is the author of many bestselling books about the Christian faith, including *Questions of Life*, *The Jesus Lifestyle*, *Why Jesus?*, *A Life Worth Living*, *Searching Issues* and *30 Days*.

**Is God still healing people today?
What about modern medicine?
What does the Bible say about healing?**

In this thought-provoking booklet, Nicky Gumbel tackles the answers to these and other key questions people may be contemplating.

Does God Heal Today? is taken from the book *Questions of Life* by Nicky Gumbel and is a talk that is given on Alpha.

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